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Best New Podcasts of 2015

Five new shows to add to your queue

**By Rob Burgess
Tribune night editor**

I drive two hours round trip to and from work every day. That's 10 hours a week — at least — in the car. This can be draining, but it does have the charm of allowing me time to listen to podcasts. There are tens of thousands of podcasts out there, so I'm definitely leaving some out. But, here are my picks for the Best New Podcasts of 2015:

5. 'THE BILL SIMMONS PODCAST/ 'CHANNEL 33'

Before he and ESPN parted ways earlier this year, I listened sporadically but intently to "The B.S. Report," hosted by Bill Simmons. After a several-month absence, I was excited to see Simmons return to the field from his new home at HBO. There are very specific circumstances under which I listen to either podcast. I skip almost every all-sports episode, unless at least one of the guests is a famous guest in whom I'm already interested. I will listen to any episode on either podcast starring Wesley Morris or Chuck Klosterman. I will be listening to every episode of the new Channel 33 movie podcast. This is never the most reliable podcast, but when it's on, it's on.

4. 'THE RUBIN REPORT'

I appreciate comedian and podcast host Dave Rubin mostly for what he brings to the larger conversation. His chosen field of inquiry in his new podcast and Ora TV show, "The Rubin Report," is an ideological split on the left side of the political spectrum. On one side you have actual liberals who stand for true liberal values like free expression, and then you have what guest Maajid Nawaz calls "the regressive left." These are the people who require trigger warnings before literature such as "Huckleberry Finn," safe spaces on college campuses and believe in the power of microaggressions. In his conversations with guests like Sam Harris and Ayaan Hirsi Ali he explores how these "regressives" do the work of those on the far right by handing the argument to them. As with Simmons' podcasts, I don't listen to every episode, but it depends on the guest list, which has so far been excellent.

3. 'THE MESSAGE'

Like "War of the Worlds" before it, "The Message" is a mockumentary of an alien intrusion played straight by the cast. I can't wait to see more podcasts like "The Message." It uses a limited run of eight episodes to provide a clear beacon to which the story is drawn. It's a science fiction story in a cutting edge format with an antique sensibility. In many ways, this podcast is a throwback to the early days of broadcasting when advertisers branded content outright, with actors pitching products in character during

commercial breaks. Sponsored by GE, I'm sure a lot of the science is at least based somewhat in fact. I would be surprised to find out they shelled out the money for this and didn't inject reality somewhere.

2. 'INVISIBILIA'

Owing much to the two programs the hosts started on, "This American Life" and "Radiolab," co-hosts Lulu Miller and Alix Spiegel co-host "'Invisibilia' (Latin for all the invisible things) ... is about the invisible forces that control human behavior: 'ideas, beliefs, assumptions and emotions,'" reads their website. "'Invisibilia' interweaves narrative storytelling with scientific research that will ultimately make you see your own life differently." NPR has been leading the charge in quality podcasting and "Invisibilia" fits right into this tradition. As it's heavily produced, the long absence is understandable. But with no new episodes for several months, fans have been left wanting more. And, there's a dance party at the end of each episode.

1. 'SERIAL'

I wrote the following Wednesday, before season two of "Serial" was released:

There has not yet been one second of the second season of the most popular podcast in history released, and I'm already calling it the Best New Podcast of 2015.

I'm including this podcast because, even though it's not technically new, each season will have no crossover with each other. In my Dec. 31, 2014, House of Burgess column, "The Best of 2014 Awards," I declared the first season of "Serial" the Best New Podcast of 2014; a designation I stand by.

The release date of the second season "Serial" has been pushed back several times. I have been fiending for new episodes, a feeling only heightened by rumors that the next season would center around the case of Bowe Bergdahl. Unless something incredibly unforeseen happens and the new season is released between the time I finish this and the time it's published, and it turns out to be terrible, I feel pretty confident about this distinction.

Now, release the new season, already.

I wrote the following Thursday, after season two, episode one of "Serial" was released that morning:

I knew it. I knew this would happen. I'm not really upset, though, because I'm just excited to have more "Serial." And it is about Bergdahl. (Read the late Michael Hasting's definitive account of Bergdahl, "America's Last Prisoner of War," in the June 2012 edition of Rolling Stone for more.)

To add an extra layer of interest for me, Bergdahl was questioned and released from a drug raid in which sheriff's deputies also arrested actress Alicia Silverstone's brother David (!) in Redwood Valley, California, which is

in Mendocino County, where I used to live. I think some die-hard "Serial" fans might be disappointed because it's not a murder mystery like last time, but I'm sticking with my recommendation.

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